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UNCLAS GUATEMALA 002248

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KJUS ASEC SNAR KCRM GT

SUBJECT: GUATEMALA: ATTEMPT TO DISLODGE SQUATTERS LEAVES  
TEN DEAD

11. (SBU) Summary: At least ten persons, including four police, were killed in an August 31 police attempt to remove several hundred squatters from a farm in southwestern Guatemala. The squatters had occupied the farm to protest GOG inaction following the apparent disappearance last year of the farm administrator after an alleged dispute with the farm owner. According to initial media and police reports, the squatters opened fire on police (who did not initially have firearms) with AK-47s and other weapons, thus provoking a melee that ended with four police and six squatters dead, and more than two dozen persons wounded, including fifteen police. The Congress is summoning cabinet members to explain the government's handling of the incident and the police are conducting an internal investigation. End Summary.

12. (SBU) According to police officials, the confrontation began when members of the Civilian National Police (PNC) attempted to evict squatters from two farms in Retalhuleu Department. When the PNC contingent neared the Nueva Linda farm, it encountered barricades consisting of downed trees and burning tires. The PNC Southern District Commander then reportedly pulled back his men and called PNC Headquarters in the capital to request reinforcements. The PNC commander also summoned the judge who had issued the eviction order, the local prosecutor, an official of the office of the Guatemalan Human Rights ombudsman, and the Department governor. The PNC commander claims that gunfire (which he recognized as AK-47 fire) erupted from the squatter ranks while he and the other GOG officials were meeting with five squatter leaders. The GOG officials and the PNC forces immediately fled the scene. Following the arrival of requested police reinforcements, PNC personnel attempted to surround the Nueva Linda farm to drive out the squatters, thus leading to multiple individual firefights between the two sides.

13. (SBU) The GOG also sent between 80-100 soldiers, one armored personnel carrier, and a water cannon to reinforce the PNC forces at the farm. Several media reporters claimed to have been beaten by the police during the melee, and there is one unconfirmed media account of an extrajudicial execution of a squatter by PNC personnel. The PNC internal affairs (OPR) office is investigating the entire incident. Congress is summoning Minister of Government Carlos Vielman to explain the police handling of the incident as well as Agriculture Minister Alvaro Aguilar and Human Rights Prosecutor Sergio Morales for their testimony.

14. (SBU) Upon learning of the outbreak of violence, the GOG dispatched a delegation that included Minister of Government Vielmann, Human Rights Commissioner Frank LaRue, and Roving Ambassador Rigoberto Menchu. The delegation managed to persuade the squatters to withdraw from the farm. Human Rights Commissioner LaRue told the Embassy's human rights officer that while he deplored the violence, he supported the GOG action because the government "could not allow armed groups to fire on the police" and had "a responsibility to reestablish law and order." LaRue said he believed the campesinos initiated the violence with homemade pipebombs and gunshots. He said the police initially went in only with batons but required armed reinforcements when campesino resistance turned violent.

15. (SBU) A leading human rights activist told poloff that 130 farms are currently held by squatters, and 40 have pending eviction orders. As a result of negotiations with several campesino organizations, the GOG had suspended all eviction orders for a 90-day period due to expire next week. The Nueva Linda squatters did not, however, belong to any of these campesino organizations. They were reportedly occupying the Nueva Linda farm not to lay claim to the land or to protest labor conditions but to draw attention to the GOG's alleged failure to investigate the disappearance of the farm manager, who was also a campesino leader.

16. (SBU) Comment: We are following these events closely, and in touch with government officials, human rights activists and labor leaders to get as full and accurate picture of the Nueva Linda tragedy as possible. Competing versions of events make reliable information elusive, and we are awaiting further details before reaching conclusions about the handling of this incident. The confrontation at

Nueva Linda received intense media scrutiny, and the GOG is appropriately seized with the issue.

HAMILTON